To Be The Land Of A Thousand Classics

By BS Murthy

The universal success of *The God of Small Things* and the exuberant outburst of Salman Rushdie on 'regional' Indian writing call for a dispassionate approach to the genesis of Indo-English writing, nay, all Indian writing. Let us first propitiate the '*God of Small Things'* before we turn our attention to the '*Satan of Verses'*

As Arundhati Roy's success is of historical magnitude, it would be in order to follow the Gibbonian track to seek its causes. To this enquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned|: that it was owing to the newness of 'The God of Small things', exemplifies by the peculiar and pixilated use of the language to weave a sensuous story in a sinusoidal fashion, and the magical power of the narration, repetitions notwithstanding, that enthralls the reader throughout. But as truth and reason seldom find so favorable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use

passion of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose. We may still be permitted, though with becoming submission to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes, to borrow from Gibbon, of the unprecedented success of *The God of Small Things,* it will, perhaps, appear that it was most effectually favored by the three following causes. 1. The Indo-Christian ambience of the subject 2. The extraordinary hype bestowed upon it in a sustained manner, 3. The glamour and intelligence of its author.

As the second is widely felt, and the third truly perceived, it is the first of the secondary causes that needs to be delved into at some length for a general understanding. While, 'The God of Small Things' is selling in six figures in The States, the other two most publicized faces of Indo-Anglican writing, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth, reportedly, have come a cropper there. The reason, perhaps, is all too apparent on appraisal, notwithstanding the relative merits of their works. Rushdie's writings are about Indo-Muslim ethos, while Seth's 'Suitable Boy' is in essence Indo-Hindu, and both of which are alien to the American cultural mindset. On the other hand, the Christian experience conveyed in Roy's book, abetted in the exotic Indian setting, could vibe well with the American cultural consciousness that helped it to position itself, for months on, on The New York Times Best Seller List. For the very same reason, perhaps, the book got patronized, in translations, in many European countries as well.

However, the culture-literary scene in England, where Rushdie and Seth too sell well, not to speak of Roy, is altogether different. Owing to historical causes, the British and privy to the Indo-Hindu as well as Indo-Muslim socio-cultural nuances, and for nostalgic reasons tend to condescend to patronize Indo literary products packaged with the right kind of market mix.

This inherent anomaly of Indo-English writing seems to have been grasped by many an aspiring writer to stay afloat in the treacherous literary waters. Some feel constrained, so it appears, to pave their literary way to the Western markets over the trans-continental route by transplanting assorted alien characters, for no rhyme save for a reason, in the Indian social sub-soil. But in spite of this promising recipe, or perhaps, because of it, most of the fare turns out to be stale literary *kichdi.* Most of this effort seems to lack conviction as superficial alien pegs are sought to be placed I soulless holes of the shallow native soil. Paradoxically, this compulsion occasioned the wastage of much

Indian literary talent. Besides; the formula in most cases, failed to click in the West leaving many a hopeful stuck.

This is where Arundhati Roy scores. Being a Syrian Christian herself, she instinctively captured the ambience of her community ethos, and artfully crafted the East-West equations, albeit Christian, to make *The God of Small Things* refreshingly appealing, and eminently readable, to one and all in India, and the world over.

What about the compulsions and quality of the Indian regional writing?" the prose writing –both fiction and non-fiction-created I this period (post-independence) by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work that most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages', during the same time. Thus spake Salman Rushdie, ruffling many a vernacular feather, and occasioning much regional breast beating. And the decibel levels of the retaliatory counter-trumpeting that followed could have made Rushdie more sleepless than the fear of the fatwa ever did earlier. To be fair to Rushdie, he did concede that he came to this conclusion based on his reading of the available body of translations, which obviously failed to inspire.

Why single our Rushdie when Naipaul is not flattering either. In 'An Area of Darkness', he wrote that "the feeling is widespread that, whatever English might have done for Tolstoy, it can never do justice to India 'language' writers. This is possible: what I read of them in translation did not encourage me to read more. Premchand turned out to be minor fabulist. Other writers quickly fatigued me with their assertions that poverty was sad, that death was sad. Many of the modern short stories were only refurnished folk tales…' can there be smoke without fire, or are these two highly successful and decorated writers jealous of their poor vernacular cousins to insinuate in like manner? But before we go into that, we should have a look at the other side of the coin as well. U.R. Ananthamurthy, President, Sahitya Academy, sounds eminently reasonable when he states: "that no Indian writer in any of the languages can assume to know what is happening in the Indian languages. Rushdie does not even live in India. How can he make such an enormous assumption?"

But would human curiosity leave the issue at that so stoically? Doubtful, given the human propensity for comparison. Why, for that matter, don't we come across people who claim their language is the best evolved, ad that their literature is better? It does not stop at that either: endless arguments ensure

among the literati of the same like about the perceived merit of some writers over the others of their own language. Can one deny such debates ensuring literary introspection besides improving human understanding? By being privy to the varied experiences of the people of our vast lad, all Indians should stand to gain intellectually. And the only way out for effecting inter-linguistic cultural interaction is to bring all the noteworthy works in Indian regional languages into the English mainstream through translations. This enables the worth of the composite Indian writing to be judged on a single platform, by us as well as by others. But in the solution seems to lie the problem itself.

It has been, more or less, accepted, even by the protagonists of the regional language pre-eminence, that the available quality of the translations is woefully inadequate, for most part, robbing the Preston beauty of the originals. There is another school of thought that the real taste of the regional works cannot be captured in English translations owing to their unique linguistic flavor. First, let us turn to the alleged poor quality of the translations. Assuming the translators at work are novices, who are unable to capture the nuances of the original regional masterpieces, why should the professionals be shying away from the calling? For sure, there would be sufficient number of well-read professionals capable of experiencing the nuances of the regional masterpieces, why should the professionals be shying away from the calling? For sure, there would be sufficient number of well-read professionals capable of experiencing the nuances of the regional works, who could also have been exposed to the intricacies of English, in all regions, to run out competent translations. What could be preventing these learned bi-linguists from bring the masterpieces of their mother tongues to the international like light? Besides attending to the patriotic calling, there would be chance too to make a name for themselves, if not money, in the process. But this, as alleged by many, is not happening. But why? Could it be possible that those who savored the best of world literature while acquiring mastery over English find the native stuff unsavory? It would serve well the regionalists to open channels with their bi-linguists, who hold the international literary barometers, to exchange notes, and then to update their efforts if necessary. Till then Rushdie will get away by default.

About the untranslatability of some of the vernacular works. The exponents of this theory, without their realizing it, may be admitting to the queer nature of such works in regional languages. If some works appeal solely for their unique vernacular glitter, which obviously does not lend itself for translation, then

they deserve to remain where they are, for the greatness of world literature owes itself to substance in the main.

But where will all this, lead the Indian literature to? Shall it rest on the laurels of s*mall things* for all time to come. Going by the potential of our diverse cultural backdrop, to inspire varied literary expressions. India should, one day, be the land of a thousand classics. But to realize the dream there seems to be a need for the change of attitudes- of the writers, of the publishers and, of course, of the reading public. Firstly, our writers should weave 'modern' stories around our varied cultural canvas rather than seeking worn-out western crutches as props, to explore true Indian fallibilities and possibilities. When asked to buy, as of now, the Indian readers may say there is nothing inspiring, barring an odd *'God of Small Things'* for them to venture into the arena of Indian creative writing. The vital links in the chain are the publishers who should consciously look for, and promote rue Indian experiences sans Western trespassing. It is only thus, in time, we may have our own Tolstoys and Zolas, who, one day could trod on the world literary scene as colossuses, and make India the land of a thousand classics.